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Tow, Texas

When the Water Recedes

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When the Water Recedes

by

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Abstract

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When the Water Recedes

by

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As a town reliant on the waters of northern Lake Buchanan, Tow, Texas has been devastated by the state's ongoing drought, which began in 2008. For six years the water has been low. For the past two years, the lake has vanished. Many Tow locals problems have been caused by a mix of poor water management and natural disaster. Water authorities say the lakes are functioning properly, and the water has dwindled due to the large number of water users and the harsh and unpredictable Texas climate. Regardless of the cause, the lack of water in Tow has ruined a beautiful lake, destroyed individual livelihoods and crippled a small town's economy. This is the story of several Tow locals' struggle to stay afloat through a drought that could soon become the drought of record.

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Tow, Texas

When the Water Recedes

TOW — Rick Denison releases his flock of white homing pigeons from their coop every morning. Dozens of the birds swoop from their coop, tightly packed, circling the meadow surrounding his resort, The Eagles Nest Lodge, before returning to a nearby oak tree. They're "white dove," a side business for Denison; he releases them at events like weddings and birthday parties as a sign of hope.

The doves aren't Denison's primary income, nor should there be a meadow below them as they turn together and circle his lodge. Six years ago, the pigeons would have been flying over the vast, northern edge of Lake Buchanan. But the waters of the lake have dried up along with the tourism that kept Denison's business in the hamlet of Tow, Texas alive.

The sparkle of the thin, slithering Colorado River hundreds of yards away is all that's left of the lake in Denison's part of the world.

Six years ago, Lake Buchanan lapped up against the small peninsula where the Eagle's Nest Lodge sits. Kids could swim just yards from a row of cabins lining Denison's little finger of land. Sunburnt fisherman pulled into the nearby sloughs to throw their cast nets at schools of shad. The smell of fried catfish and striper wafted through the air near suppertime as vacationers cooked their day's haul.

Tow might be the epitome of Texas' water woes and the devastating effects of the ongoing drought. Like the lake, businesses are slowly vanishing along the rural roads, for sale signs checker the few that remain. Tilted docks rest on dry land. Water restriction signs line neighborhood entrances and sputtering wells keep residents wondering if their groundwater supply will last through another blistering summer.

Tow locals are tough people. But I could see the pain in their eyes as they looked out over the grassy meadow that used to be their lake. And I could hear the caustic lilt

Their voices as they spoke to me about the fickleness of nature and the rules and authorities — namely the Lower Colorado River Authority — that govern their dear water.

"I hope it comes up in my lifetime," Dennison told me.

I met with Denison on a warm morning in June. He took me for a ride on his golf cart – preferred mode transportation among Tow locals – along the dry lakebed surrounding his resort.

A hundred yards from his former shoreline, his fishing dock sits crooked on dry ground, a couple 10-foot Cottonwood trees grow from the middle. It's been two years since the dock floated. A dozen of docks nearby sit in the same predicament.

We drove further down, about four hundred yards, to the lake's edge, now a shallow, slow-moving river. It's all that remains of Lake Buchanan on this northern edge of the former lake. His dog, a sort of Blue Heeler, Border Collie mix ran into the chocolate brown water and immediately started sinking into the sludgy river bottom. The sulfuric smell of old, turned mud drifted through the hot air. A layer of greenish foam ringed the lazy river's edge.

"Try to walk out there. At most, it may be a foot and a half deep out there. Put some of that (mud) on your hands and smell of it. It's a sooty mess," Denison said.

Denison is a squat man with gravely voice. He's good humored. He, like many others in Tow, smiles while he talks of the potential ruin he faces. This resort was his second life. After decades years in the computer industry working for IBM, he decided the stress was too much. He took his savings, pulled up anchor from Austin and bought the Eagle's Nest Lodge in 2005.

He would experience less than three years of a brimming lake.

When I visited him, Denison didn't have a single reservation lined up for the summer. Normally, he'd have several of his cabins booked for at least a few days, possibly weeks. His RV spots would be filling as well.

Denison hasn't update his website to reflect the new reality his resort faces. Pictures on the site still show a topped-off lake hugging the resort's shores. Sometimes customers call to make a reservation, unaware of the lake levels.

"I tell them, 'there's no water on this side of the lake. If you bring a boat you can maybe go put it in at the slab, if you can find your way around out there,'" Denison told me.

Every boat ramp is closed on the lake. To get a boat on the water, fisherman must navigate serpentine dirt roads on the lake bed down to the new, unofficial boat ramps: fortuitously located granite slabs. Few boats prowl the northern edge of the lake anymore.

Denison knows telling customers the lake is gone will likely drive them away, but he feels he's obliged to do it anyway.

As the water receded, Denison and many other business owners would learn that the low lake levels would bring a host of new problems for their businesses, Tow and the state.

Figure 1: A dock in front of the Eagle's Nest Lodge and a dry lake.

Figure 2: A homing pigeon takes off from Rick Denison's bird coop.

Mastering the Colorado River, Establishing of the LCRA

When it revealed the remains of Old Bluffton Town, drought uncovered the harsh realities and ironies of bridling the Colorado River.

Texas authorities dammed the Colorado for many reasons; one was the its unpredictable flooding. The river proved their reasoning right in 1938. Shortly after completing Buchanan Dam, floods filled the basin and created Lake Buchanan in a fraction of the time the engineers anticipated. The town of Bluffton, which sat on the river bank, was abandoned.

The first year the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) managed the impounded Colorado River, flooding destroyed Bluffton Town three miles south of Tow.

A flooding Colorado River was a menace, according to Comer Clay's University of Texas PhD dissertation titled *"The Lower Colorado River Authority, A study in Politics and Public Administration."*

Many have written about the birth of the Highland Lakes and the LCRA, but few accounts feel so authentic as Clay's dissertation. The report was written in 1948 with a typewriter on thin parchment and signed by famed water historian Walter Prescott Webb.

One epic flood in 1869, according to Clay's report, raised the Colorado 43 feet at Austin, resulting in an estimated flow rate of about 520,000 cubic feet per second. That's nearly twice the average high flow rate of Niagara Falls, or about the normal flow of the Mississippi River as it passes Vicksburg, Miss.

The Texas government impounded the river for several reasons. It would make the lower stretches navigable. Hydroelectric power could be produced. Rice farmers near the river's terminus in Matagorda Bay could avoid the devastation of flooding and have a reliable source for irrigation. Reservoirs could catch flood waters and hold them for Central Texas cities.

One dam, many realized, would not suffice to bridle the Colorado. It would take a chain of impoundments and lakes. The chain of lakes would be called the Highland Lakes and would eventually include Inks, Marble Falls, LBJ, Travis, Austin.

With the help of a $4.5 million loan from the federal government – New Deal money – the State of Texas completed the dam. At the time it was built, Buchanan dam was the longest multiple arch dam on earth, at two miles long. Today it is the largest in the nation.

Control of Buchanan Dam, and the dams that would later be built beneath it, was seeded to the LCRA in 1935, three years before the dam was completed. The river authority was modeled after the Tennessee River Authority.

At the time, few could have anticipated the growth of the region, how dear the water would be or how powerful the river authority would become.

The LCRA and Water Management

Lake Buchanan is low because the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) released a mass of water in 2011 during the hottest, driest summer in Texas history, Steve Buchanan told me. The lake is staying low because of the drought

Steve Buchanan – no relation to Lake Buchanan's namesake – operated The Pelican Point Resort, which sits on a small peninsula about a quarter mile up the highway from the Eagle's Nest Lodge. I met him there on an unseasonably warm December afternoon in late 2012.

We rode his golf cart to the end of his property, 150 yards away. Five minutes into our conversation, Buchanan looked disdainfully at his beached dock and proclaimed the real problem with his lake is the LCRA, the quasi-government agency that oversees the entire river and its lakes.

"They promote themselves as stewards of the river," Buchanan said as he squinted his eyes and gazed over the vast, dry lakebed. "Is this water management?"

Buchanan is an old hand in the area. He joked he ought to run for local office, owing to his surname and longstanding ties to the area. He has a photo of his grandfather holding him in front of the lake dated 1963 — he was one year old. He proudly pulled a small, worn diary of his grandfather's from a bookshelf. In it was a catalogue of the old man's days out on the lake fishing for striped bass; terse entries dating back to the 1950s noted the weather, temperature and catch.

Gray bearded and thick handed, Buchanan fits the description of fishing camp operator, a more apt description of his business, he said. He used to run a septic tank cleaning trucking in the area. He smokes hand-rolled Bugler cigarettes and occasionally lets out a hacking coughing. Salt stains circle the brim of the Pelican Point trucker hat that's faded from navy to royal blue under the scorching Texas sun. And like the other business owners I met in Tow, Buchanan is more than he seems.

He earned a bachelor's degree in geology from the University of Texas, worked in Austin's tech industry prior to buying the resort about ten years ago and he served as a volunteer on the LCRA's advisory board for years. When he talks about the predicament of Tow and the diminished lake, the minutiae of water management roll easily off his tongue.

The last time the lake was at 1020 (Tow parlance for full) was 2008, Buchanan told me in April. The lake surface has been below its historical average of 1012 feet above sea level for 54 straight months.

As of Aug. 1, the lake remains below average and is forecast to dip below its lowest point ever in 2013 if rain remains illusive.

Buchanan knows some of the LCRA's board members personally. They're nice people, he said, but their decision to release the water in 2011 was wrong and devastating. The lake dropped 20 feet in a matter of four months, mostly due to the water authority releasing 433,000 acre feet – more water than the City of Austin uses in a year – to rice farmers.

Because of the lake now, "I am financially ruined," Buchanan said.

LCRA officials have maintained the release of water was unavoidable due to binding contracts.

In a phone interview with Ryan Rowney, water operations manager for the LCRA, he said the LCRA was obligated to release the water.

"The releases in 2011 were based on total combined storage on January 1. That's reflective of our existing…water management plan. We had legally binding contracts in place and we follow those contracts," Rowney said.

Whether or not the LCRA could have broken the contract, Rowney was not sure.

"I do know that if we would have stopped releases there would have been a rice crop in 2012, and that would have put us right back in the same situation," Rowney said.

The water management plan that Rowney referred to sits at the heart of Lake Buchanan residents' disagreements with the LCRA. The management plan governs the distribution of water from the Highland Lakes to major users, which are roughly divided into two groups: firm customers (including cities near the lakes) and interruptible customers (including rice farmers near the coast).

Firm customers, like the City of Austin, cannot have their water cut off. They pay a higher price per acre foot of water than interruptible customers, who can have their water use cut off if Central Texas' main reservoirs, Lakes Travis and Buchanan, fall below certain levels, or "trigger points." An acre-foot of water equals about 326,000 gallons or a year's worth of water for three average homes.

That the water management plan, a guide for the use of Central Texas' most precious resource, called for draining the lakes at such an inopportune time in 2011 concerns Jo Karr Tedder, president of the Central Texas Water Coalition.

Tedder formed the coalition after she sat on the LCRA's advisory board as a representative of the Lake Buchanan area but didn't feel her side was adequately represented. The Coalition is a nonprofit dedicated to advancing the interests of those around the Highland Lakes. Chief among the practices the Coalition aims to change is rice farmers' use of water.

A common line among Central Texans, and members of the Central Texas Water Coalition, is that rice farmers are well connected to the LCRA and benefit from the long-standing ties to the river authority.

"(Rice farmers) pay the least amount and they get the most water. It's like we said, the tail is wagging the dog in the water management," Tedder told me at a Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) meeting in June.

Rice farmers pay about $6 per acre-foot of raw, untreated water from the Highland Lakes. The City of Austin and municipalities pay about $150 for the same amount.

David Lindsay — Tedder's colleague, an engineer and a board member of the Coalition — says the low price has been a disincentive for rice farmers to harvest water from their own region, either from the ground or by building their own water reserves downstream.

In Central Texas, rainwater is scarce and groundwater is fickle. But down near the coast, Lindsay said, rains and groundwater are more plentiful. There's just never been a financial incentive to tap their own resource when water from Lakes Travis and Buchanan have been so well priced.

"What do you conserve that you don't pay for? If it's free, are you going to conserve it?" Lindsay said.

The TCEQ is one of the only agencies with oversight of LCRA activities and it exercises that authority through its approval of the water management plan whenever the plan is updated or changed.

In 2011, after the LCRA released water to rice farmers and lowered the lakes substantially, the LCRA asked the TCEQ for approval to alter the water management plan in a way that would effectively cut off water releases to rice farmers. The TCEQ approved the management plan change and for two straight years the rice farmers have not received irrigation water from the Highland Lakes.

What is the Water Plan

Assembling the plan is a major undertaking and a sort of balancing act. The LCRA must account for thousands of water users. The City of Austin needs its drinking water. Rice farmers near the terminus of the Colorado River in Matagorda Bay need huge amounts of water for their crops. Power plants suck from the river as well, including the South Texas Nuclear Power plant.

While many users need to pull water from the Highland Lakes, others need the water to stay put. Businesses and homeowners around lakes Travis and Buchanan need lake levels high enough to support recreation, water sports and boating.

Endangered species in the Colorado River must have a certain quantity of water released by federal law. The blue sucker fish, which lives in the Colorado south of Austin, gained attention in April when the LCRA was required to release enough water for 60,000 households to support the fish's breeding, the Austin American Statesman reported.

State law also requires that the LCRA maintain a steady flow of water to keep the river's ecosystem intact. Not only do fish and plants rely on the rive, but the brackish estuary near Matagorda Bay is habitat for mussel farming and a vast array of wildlife.

And beneath those lakeside businesses, the lake levels directly affect much of the groundwater people pump for their alluvial wells near the river and lakes.

It can seem like a big game of tug-of-war between the Highland Lakes and the downstream agriculture users, and the Colorado River itself is the rope. So far, both sides are losing.

Lakes are dwindling, rice farmers are cut off from their irrigation water and the drought continues.

TCEQ meeting

Normally, TCEQ meetings are monotonous, poorly attended affairs. But in June, more than 100 people attended, representing the Highland Lakes, rice farmers and environmental interests.

More 20 members of the public testified on topics including scientific insight, algae overgrowth, personal anger and contractual obligations.

The testimony allowed a keen observer to pull the curtain back on the public's sentiments toward the LCRA and its water management.

Debra Gernes, general manager of Travis County Water District 17, spoke in support of the Highland Lakes.

"I would caution you not get so wrapped in the sheets of data and the figures that we don't look out the window. The conditions that we are modeling for exist right now. Record low inflows and a lake level barely a foot higher than those we had in November of 2011," Gernes said. "This is a serious condition for municipal water utilities. As you've heard, there are some that have run out already."

Although she did not specify, Gernes was likely referencing the Spicewood Beach water system calamity. The LCRA managed the system.

Spicewood Beach Debacle

Spicewood Beach is a small community of about 1,100 people, many retired. It sits on the northern end of Lake Travis in a position similar to Tow's on Lake Buchanan.

On Jan. 30, 2012, Spicewood Beach's well and water system ran dry. It was the first Texas town to run out of water during the current drought. Though the well failed amid the worst single year of drought in Texas history, nature had some help.

In the year preceding the well's failure, the LCRA sold more than 1.3 million gallons of Spicewood Beach's well water to contractors, according news reports. Those contractors trucked the water out of the community up to a week before the well failed.

The LCRA has had to truck water into the town to keep the taps functioning ever since.

Back at the TCEQ Meeting

Representatives of the coast and rice farmers also testified at the TCEQ meeting, among them was Kirby Brown, a biologist for Ducks Unlimited, a leader in wetlands conservation, particularly Texas' coastal wetland and the world-class duck habitats around Matagorda Bay.

"There's a lot of non-essential watering that is used," said Brown, who lives in Austin. "I looked this winter when dormant, dead winter lawns were being irrigated on a regular basis with sprinkler systems, and here we are cutting off rice farmers. What are we doing?"

Carol Freeman was one of the last to offer public testimony. She and her husband owned the Cottonwood Cove Taverns in Tow for nearly 19 years. Business declined steadily during the drought and they were forced to sell their business. In blunt terms, Freeman described the slow-motion disaster that befell her resort.

On Memorial Day of 2011, Cottonwood Cove had three feet of water under its dock. Not much, Freeman said while read from a prepared statement.

"Then the LCRA did what it does best, made water run downhill for the sole purpose of their balance sheet and the wealthy rice farmers on the Gulf Coast," Freeman said.

"By the Independence Day holiday our business was high and dry and the LCRA continued to drain lake Buchanan. We watched as Tow evolved from a vibrant small community on the West Shores of Lake Buchanan to something we never anticipated."

No Water Slams Local Economy

Nearly every morning a group of silver-haired Tow locals gather in Penny and Bob Gilbert's tiny Tow restaurant and chatter over the hiss of eggs and hash browns frying on the flattop and the aroma of percolated coffee.

When I visited in June, they mulled the woes that have crept up on Tow and Llano county as the water backed away.

The Gilberts have owned and operated the Paradise Point Resort and its diner since 1969. They're two of the longest lasting resort owners in the area and they're fortuitously situated on one of the deepest sections of lake in Tow. Their dock still sits on ten feet of water, though it would normally float over 40.

"We have a one-night reservation this weekend. For this time of the year, usually our weekends are full and then we are half full during the week," Penny said. "That's not happening…at all. Last year it was half. This year it's not even, it's a third of what we normally have for income."

Figure 3: Penny and Bob Gilbert in the diner at Paradise Point Resort


Figure 4: Penny and Bob Gilbert and a crew of regulars in their diner.

Figure 5: A stone sculpture of a boy gazes at Paradise Point Resort.

The bit of water helps keep the resort afloat financially, but the drought has the Gilberts and the tourism industry across Llano County reeling. What began with resort owners falling into the financial red has spread, like the cracks in a drying lakebed, out beyond the lakeshores into the county and state's coffers.

Hotel tax receipts have plummeted in tandem with the receding lake.

About 60 percent of all hotel taxes in the area come from lakeside businesses, according to a 2012 economic study of Llano and Burnet County tourism.

Hotel tax receipts in Tow are down more than 60 percent, according to Llano County Tax Assessor-Collector Records. For a rural county with 20,000 people, it's a tough hit.

The drought has been so long and disturbing that a full lake won't wash away the problem. The memory of the dry lake will remain for years. Potential property buyers will always be skittish, according to the economic study.

Property values have declined in the area. Property taxes have plateaued and even declined slightly, according to local tax records. It's an ironic blessing for homeowners, but trouble for the state.

Charles Porter, a water historian and author of *Spanish Water, Anglo Water*, says it's the town, the county and the state that suffer when property taxes decline.

"What's our most valuable social value?" Porter asked me in an interview.

"It's public education, (Kindergarten) through the 12th grade. That's funded by ad valorem taxes. When the tax base goes down, there's less money for schools, even though we move money around to different districts and richer districts help poorer districts.

"Once you take away the water, land value goes down, ad valorem tax base goes down, people are uncomfortable with schools and hospitals, which means they move and the spiral continues."

A depleted lake does long-term damage, even if it rises. The effects linger in the public's memory. The threat of another drought and the knowledge of the effects will keep buyers hesitant and "slow long-term growth," the study says.

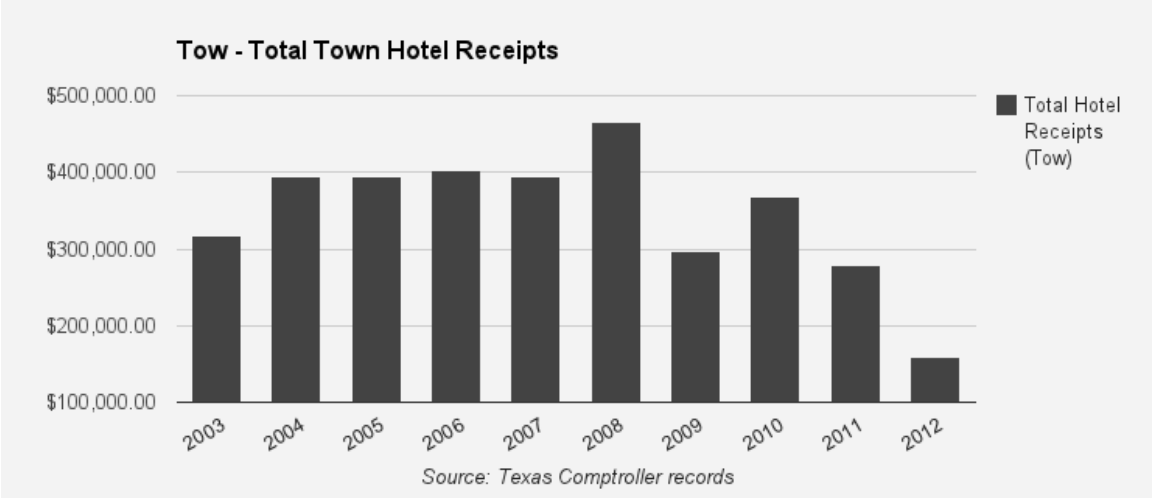

Chart 1: Total town hotel receipts for Tow.

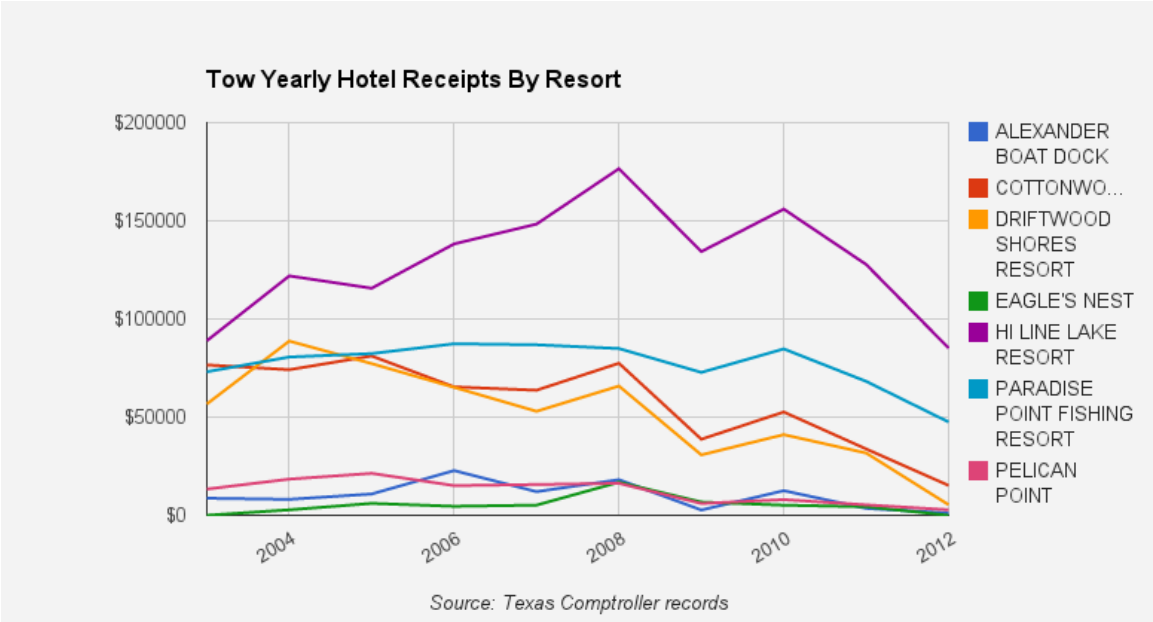

Chart 2: Total hotel receipts in Tow broken down by business.

Penny Gilbert calls Lake Buchanan a fishing lake. The show-off water skiers keep to Lake Travis.

“My husband fished at least twice a day for almost 30 years,” she said. These days far fewer fishermen dot the lake on Saturday mornings. Striper guides still hit their limits on a regular basis, but amateur, weekend angling has declined substantially, she said.

It’s difficult to put in a boat, with all public boat ramps closed. It’s also a more dangerous lake now, stumps protrude from shallows once submerged under 20 feet of water.

Low lake levels haven’t stopped Buford Howell, of Odessa, from driving five hours east to fish several times a year at Tow. I met him in Paradise Point’s diner. He’d come to settle up his tab and sat for coffee. Howell is a native of Austin (he wore nothing but burnt orange from head to toe) but came to Buchanan as a young man to visit his grandfather who lived nearby. Why drive all this way to fish in a less-than-half-full lake?

“I come from where there is no water,” he said.

A look at the lakes Buford bypasses on his five-hour journey to Buchanan reveals the disturbing picture of what could be in Central Texas, if the worst predictions of climatologists come to bear.

Figure 6: Buford Howell and a friend fish from the Paradise Point dock

Figures 7 and 8: Paradise Point Resort dock before and after a tornado, 2008. (Photo by Penny Gilbert)

Hardly anyone around Lake Buchanan mentions the first three major reservoirs on the Colorado River. They sit hundreds of miles north, in the high plains nearer to San Angelo and Lubbock. If the Highland Lakes are in critical condition, the three upper Colorado reservoirs are in hospice care.

As you travel north up the river, each reservoir is in more dire condition than the one before. In late July, the first lake, O.H. Ivie, was 18 percent full; the second lake, E.V. Spence, was five percent full; and the last lake, J.B. Thomas, was less than half a percent full.

A representative of the Upper Colorado River Authority, the diminutive, four-person counterpart to the massive LCRA, compared O.H. Ivie to a stock pond. Zero water flows out of E.V. Spence, as the lake surface doesn't top the dam.

The Parks and Wildlife Department advises anglers to forgo fishing in E.V. Spence due to excessive algal blooms that have proliferated in the hot, stagnant water.

Lake J.B. Thomas is all but gone.

Out of Lake O.H. Ivie trickles 11 cubic feet of water per second. The water is only released for the endangered Concho River Snake; otherwise, the river authority representative told me, there would be no water released at all.

Figure 9: The Pelican Point Resort's front dock. The stairs once went into Lake Buchanan.


Figure 10: The Driftwood Shores Resort dock, dry since 2010.

Life Goes On In Tow

Tow residents generally take the drought in stride. The threat of dry years is an everyday reality. Many ancillary problems were to be expected: fewer customers, dying plants, falling property values.

But other, less expected problems have hit area residents as well.

Rick Denison has hardly been able to see the Colorado River from his resort, the Eagle's Nest Lodge, for two years. Earlier this year his bank informed him he would be saddled with an unexpected expense: flood insurance.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency redrew their flood plain maps and a corner of his lodge was in a flood zone, Denison said his bank told him. Denison was automatically enrolled in an insurance plan that would cost him $1,300 a year.

"And I'm saying, you know, I'd pay for a flood!" Denison said. "You've got to be kidding me. Come look!"

FEMA flood maps are the benchmark documents that dictate who buys insurance.

Cash strapped, Denison shopped around for a more reasonably priced plan. He found one, but was forced to pay a portion of the more expensive premium.

Denison fought back. He hired an engineer to survey the land. The edge of one building was in the flood plain, the engineer found. So Denison built a small berm, not much higher than a cowboy boot, to offset the problem. The remedy brought his property out of the flood plain, he said.

Nevertheless the ordeal cost Denison about $2,000.

Burdensome regulations again hit Denison when he attempted to alter his business strategy to the suit drier climes.

Denison considered changing the old picture on his business website, which featured a full lake lapping up against the resort shore, to a photo of the empty lake.

He'd promote the area as a good place to go four wheeling, hiking and biking. The lake is gone, but wildlife still abounds, especially birds.

"A few months ago there were 200 (pelicans) out here. They were catching the drafts, I mean, like a big tornado going up," Denison said looking out over the lakebed. "But it's hard to convince anybody that they can have fun out here on the lake bottom," he added.

Denison asked the LCRA if he could go through with his plan.

"They wrote back and said, more or less, any motorized vehicle is outlawed. They want to keep the natural setting of the lake," he said. "It's all soot. Now, how are you going to hurt this?"

Rowney, with the LCRA, said recreating on the dry lakebed is dangerous due to hooked trotlines, stumps and random objects.

While obstacles on the lake's surface are dangerous, the silt that has flowed down the Colorado and settled in the northern edge of Lake Buchanan is tainted. Ryan Rowney of the LCRA:

"Some of the soils have migrated from the oil fields out in western Texas. Some of that soil has got issues. It's not radioactive, but it's got higher levels of heavy metals and things like that from the oil field production in West Texas.

"So, it's not like you can dredge all that soil out of the river bed and then spread it onto your field and expect grass to grow. It's sterile," Rowney told me.

Hope in Tow

Rusty Brandon held on to his business as long as he could. I met him on a brisk April day at the Hi-Line Lake Resort, which was, at its height, one of the largest and most profitable inns around Tow.

Brandon invested his life savings — accrued over decades while ascending the ladder at Southwest Airlines — on the expansive and rustic RV and resort complex.

Many would have given up as the lake and business dried up, but Brandon held on to the bitter end.

"This is our 40 years in the desert," Brandon said to me. "I just hope it doesn't actually last 40 years."

Deeply Christian, Brandon and many of his patrons would pray together and place signed rocks beneath a large cross near the front of the resort. The billboard at the resort entrance cites Corinthians 15:58 — "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Brandon is a chipper man, even in the face of utter devastation. He stood firm and waited for something biblical, a massive flood that never came.

But it will flood. Central Texas' weather operates on a boom and bust cycle. Averages are for meteorologists here. There is no normal East of the I-35 corridor, says water historian Charles Porter. (The interstate roughly splits the wetter east from Central and West Texas.)

"We will have a tropical storm come through here, as we do periodically. It will fill up Lake Travis in two or three weeks," said Porter. "If we get 15 inches of rain up there, it's full."

Flood or not, life goes on in Tow. The town reflects the natural cycle surrounding it. As some businesses wither and shutter, others sprout up to fill the void. Some less water reliant businesses have carried along through the drought.

At the northern end of Tow, a barbecue joint called the Rolling H Cafe is still smoking brisket. With not much more than a furnished doublewide trailer and a grill, Stephanie Hallmark, the owner and operator, says its business as usual, more or less.

"I'm still keeping my head afloat. I'm not borrowing from one account to pay for the other account," Hallmark said. "I still have the locals that come in."

A small winery to the north also draws a steady stream of customers past her establishment, but the lack of amateur anglers passing through the area has dampened business.

Just down the road from the Rolling H, Rick Denison holds on for wetter days. Rick's brother David recently bought and moved into the nearby Driftwood Shores Resort. The brothers live just three minutes apart by golf cart now.

David Denison bought a bargain in Driftwood Shores, and he saved the town post office in the process (it sits on the Driftwood Shores property and leases the land).

"Maybe your story will send some rain," Denison said to me.

However dire the forecasts, floods will inevitably come and fill the lakes. That's what the lakes were made to do in Central Texas: fill up with floodwater and slowly deplete in the

dry years. Until the next tropical storm or hurricane hits, the people of Tow can watch out over the lake as Rick Denison's white dove fly. They can hope for a day soon when the birds will circle over a brimming lake, not a meadow.

Figure 11: Rick Denison holds a baby homing pigeon near the coop.

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